

# **When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace Study Guide**

**When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace by Le Ly Hayslip**

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## Plot Summary

In 1986, Le Ly Hayslip returns to Vietnam, the home of her childhood after many years living in America. Le Ly is the sixth child of a family living in the war torn village of Ky La. The village is important to the warring Viet Cong and Republican armies because of its location, between the two factions. The armies fight over the land but also fight for the loyalty of the village people. When Le Ly is a very young child, she is caught up in the game the Viet Cong teach the children, that of playing at being informants for the Viet Cong. Le Ly says that the children want the favor of the Viet Cong so badly that they are willing to send family members and friends to their deaths. Le Ly, with a brother on the side of the Republicans and a sister with a Viet Cong police officer husband, is soon torn and loses interest. But she shows two acts of bravery - standing her ground when an American helicopter sets down in the rice paddy where she's working and later risking her life to warn of an American and Republican presence. These acts shove her to the forefront of the Viet Cong's radar. When she's arrested and taken to a prison notorious for its torture of Viet Cong soldiers and informants, her mother bribes her way out of the prison. The Viet Cong, certain she must have given information to secure her early release, become her enemy and she's forced from her village.

There begins a saga of broken relationships and short-term jobs, often given up because Le Ly refuses to become a prostitute at the hands of her tormentors in a country torn apart by civil war. When she finds herself in a relationship with a married man, she has hope but his wife forces her to leave the area and she gives birth to a son, then sets out to find a way to support her family. Her father, deeply grieved at the loss of his family, commits suicide rather than continuing to face the situation and his fear that the Viet Cong will get their hands on Le Ly. Le Ly begins a black market business, selling small trinkets and necessities such as soap, cigarettes and even marijuana to soldiers in the jungle. She takes great risks but earns great returns and keeps her family off the streets. She eventually meets an older American civil engineer who proposes marriage and takes Le Ly back to the United States with him - an escape she knows as her only chance to live a happy life away from the conflict of her homeland.

In 1986, Le Ly returns to Vietnam and her home. While she wants desperately to see her mother and siblings, she is also seeking answers to a lifetime of questions. She finds the country much as she left it in the natural tendency for people to fear each other and their government but hopes that there can eventually come changes that will heal her family and her home.



# Chapters One and Two

## Chapters One and Two Summary and Analysis

Le Ly is a tiny infant weighing only two pounds at birth and her mother is told that the merciful thing to do would be to suffocate the baby. She refuses. At forty, Le Ly's mother is healthy and attractive, prompting envy from other women of the village of Ky La. Because of her age, she hasn't enough breast milk and feeds Le Ly on buffalo milk until she gains strength. Le Ly is often called Bay Ly, meaning sixth born, and she says she can't blame the rest of the family for not supporting her mother in her efforts to keep Le Ly alive. She says it is almost like the rest of the family doesn't want to become attached in case Le Ly dies.

Le Ly has sisters named Hai, Lan and Ba Xuan, a brothers Bon Nghe and Sau Ban. Her mother was orphaned at a young age and took over the care of her young brothers and sisters with the help of an older sister, Thu. Soldiers later kill Thu.

Le Ly's village, Ky La, is between the northern and southern provinces and is, therefore, always in a position of conflict with families divided by loyalties and both sides wanting physical control of the land. Hai, Le Ly's oldest sister, is married to a man named Ba Lac, who is arrested for "suspiciously carrying stalks of rice along the road." He is taken to Don Pho Xanh, a local prison, but is later moved and never seen again. Hai, who has a young daughter, will eventually go to Saigon to find work after spending months trying to do the work of both husband and wife. Men in that position generally remarry quickly. Le Ly says that the greatest fear of a person is to have no children to care for them in their old age. There comes a day when Bon Nghe, the oldest son and his mother's favorite, is going to Hanoi to serve in the military. Le Ly says that the family really expects that they'll never again see Bon.

The story then reverts from her memories of her childhood to the moment she leaves her family in the Los Angeles International Airport, bound for Vietnam. She has two of her sons, Jimmy and Alan, with her but Tommy is at school. When one of the boys asks what will happen if she's arrested, she says that she'll survive in prison.

In Chapter Two, Le Ly talks about her relationship with her father, Trong. He tells her things and spends time with her that would ordinarily be reserved as time with a son. It's her father, Trong, who tells her that she has the same bearing as her ancestors and she holds to this when she needs courage. It's also he who tells Le Ly that her first job should be to "live in peace and tend the shrine of our ancestors," tasks that are more important than that of a soldier's fighting.

Children in her village often play at war but Le Ly says her heart isn't in the game. When she pretends to be a Republican soldier, she imagines her mock victim could be her brother, Bon Nghe, and when she pretends to be a Viet Cong she imagines her sister, Ba, who is married to a policeman in Danang. One day, Le Ly's teacher, Manh, is



dragged out of his house by the Viet Cong and shot as a traitor. Le Ly's father uses it as a lesson to teach Le Ly that she has to be careful what she says and who she talks to. The Viet Cong soldiers warn of a big battle coming and the residents of the village build bunkers. That built by Le Ly's family is at the edge of the village and so is made larger to accommodate extra people who might need to seek refuge. The families soon develop a tight control over their emotions when a loved one is killed by the Republicans or during fighting, fearing that the Republican soldiers will also kill that person's family. No one claims the body until the soldiers leave the area. Someone usually asks the Republican soldiers to dispose of the body, further eliminating suspicion. Meanwhile, there are attempts to brainwash the citizens with stories of Ho Chin Minh who is described like "a kindly grandfather."

One day Le Ly is in the rice paddies when an American military chopper sets down. Le Ly is afraid she'll be sucked up into the air and so ducks down and remains where she is. She has an up-close view of the American soldier and tells her father that the "dragonfly" was "wonderful." She is touted by the villagers as a brave woman for standing her ground with the Americans and doesn't say that it was fear that kept her rooted to her position. One day Le Ly is caught outside when bombing starts and takes cover in a trench. She's arrested and taken to prison where she's asked why she was away from her home at night. She is beaten mercilessly but then released. She finds her mother and her brother-in-law, Chin, who is a policeman, waiting for her at the gate.

The story reverts to Le Ly's current situation in 1986, having just arrived at the Embassy in Bangkok. She says that she was on the Viet Cong "death list" when she left her village in 1965 and was listed as a black marketer when she left Saigon five years later. Now she finds the officials not all that interested in questioning her but remains worried about the upcoming trip. She attaches herself to a woman with a little girl, questioning her about travels in Vietnam, and a businessman named Per tells her that he's going into the country and will accompany her. Le Ly is initially skeptical, fearing that he's trying to get information from her for the government, but she eventually agrees to trust him.

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Le Ly talks at length about the farming methods and crops grown in her village, vital to the survival of individual farmers and to the village as a whole. Failures in crops are blamed on wrongs by the farmers. If no wrongs can be cited, the consensus is that the farmers simply didn't work hard enough at their assigned tasks. There are important traditions included in Le Ly's narrative as well, including the need to pay homage to ancestors. Another important lesson taught to Le Ly by her mother is that people of the West need to work for happiness while the people of the East are born with happiness and need only to protect it.

Le Ly's mother has a strict code of ethics about how women should behave, evidenced by a story Le Ly tells about an argument between her mother and father in public. When her father speaks, her mother contradicts him again and he slaps her. Later, she tells Le Ly she's crying not because the slap hurt but because she shamed her husband. Her



mother believes that a girl's job is to learn to be a good wife and the wife's first job is to please her husband's mother. Le Ly's father, Trong, says that his parents divided their land among their sons but that he got the largest share because Le Ly's mother impressed them with her diligence and they felt she and Trong would take care of the land.

The Viet Cong and Republican soldiers constantly fight over the village of Ky La, both for the physical control of the land and for the control of its people. This control is sought sometimes through offering incentives but more often through threats and violence. Le Ly says that the Viet Cong have taught the children that their deaths would be dishonorable if they died after torture, therefore they believe that they must commit suicide if captured. She says that the children treat the entire situation as if it was a game but her father and the other adults realize the seriousness of the situation.



# Chapters Three and Four

## Chapters Three and Four Summary and Analysis

Le Ly is soon on her way to Saigon, now called Ho Chi Minh City and recalls her own trip to Saigon as a young, naïve farm girl. The story then reverts to Le Ly's past and she says that soon after her first arrest, she returns to Ky La to find that American and Republic soldiers are "everywhere." There are minor bouts of fighting with neither side able to claim a victory but then the Viet Cong plan a massive attack. Le Ly is caught at the home of a neighbor when the fighting starts and remains there until the heart of the battle moves away from her location. She sees a badly wounded man on her way home but knows from her training at the hands of the Viet Cong that she can't help him. She says that there is rubble everywhere and the villagers are now faced with the never-ending task of rebuilding their homes, fields and lives with whatever resources they have left. She says that the Republicans are "like elephants" that are easily seen ahead of time while the Viet Cong are like snakes, slithering in virtually unseen. Le Ly points out that both are deadly but that at least the elephant can be seen ahead of time.

A planned raid by the Republicans and Americans is foiled when Le Ly, risking her life, signals the Viet Cong of the presence of enemy forces. She's later arrested and taken to Don Thi Tran prison but her stay is very short, again because of her brother-in-law, Chin, who now says he won't help her again. When Le Ly returns home she is lauded a hero and a song is dedicated to her honor. She's given the task of teaching the points of war and duty to the younger children and says it's just like the war games she played when she was younger, except that everyone is now on the same side. When there's an attack on the nearby village of Bai Gian and Ky La accepts some refugees. Le Ly and a girl from Bai Gian are again captured and this time are taken to My Thi, a prison camp known for excessive torture techniques. Le Ly pretends to be a "dumb schoolgirl," rationalizing that a torturer would become bored when faced with a child who has nothing to divulge. She and two other girls are tied to a post and covered with honey so that nearby ant mounds soon cover them, biting mercilessly.

Abruptly, Le Ly is released, her mother having paid half her dowry as a bribe. While Le Ly is relieved, she soon discovers that the Viet Cong believe that the only way she would have been released is if she'd given the Republicans information and she falls from a hero to a carefully watched enemy. Members of the Viet Cong take Le Ly to a meeting that is really a mock trial and afterwards, two of the young men rape her.

The story reverts to 1986 at the Vietnam border where Le Ly is filled with memories at her first sight of the country, mostly recalling aspects of the war. Inside the Tan Son Nhut Airport, Per passes through and is retrieving his bag when Le Ly is detained by an official who tells her that she is to be at a specific government office at a specific time. She is filled with dread, believing that this means she is to be thrown in prison.



In Chapter Four, Le Ly and Per consider the mandate and realize that she's not being arrested but will be briefed on what she can and cannot do while in the country. The story reverts to 1963 when Le Ly leaves their village. Le Ly's sister Ba helps her find a job but the husband of the house attacks her and she breaks dishes in her attempt to flee, a point that prompts the wife to dismiss her. Le Ly slips back to her village and learns that her mother has been harassed by the Viet Cong since Le Ly's departure and had been seconds from death when a family member stepped in and convinced the executioner that sparing her life would buy much-needed good wile. Her mother is to leave the village and together she and Le Ly travel to Danang and then Saigon.

They initially stay with friends of Le Ly's mother in Saigon but when Le Ly rebuffs their son's advances he tells his parents that the women must go and they are asked to leave. Le Ly's sister Hai is working as a cook in a large house and Le Ly stays with her for several days, helping out, but the master of the house doesn't want Le Ly to remain indefinitely. Le Ly is hospitalized with stomach problems and her mother is so helpful in the ward that she is offered a job upon Le Ly's release. Their benefactress helps them find permanent positions in the home of a wealthy family, Anh and Lien. Le Ly is to care for the couple's two sons who are, Le Ly says, no trouble. She sometimes has time to help her mother with her chores and sometimes accompanies Lien on various outings. Anh is wealthy and Le Ly is attracted to him. One night Le Ly is told to wait up to open the door for Anh and he kisses her, later apologizing though he begins spending more time at home and the attraction between the two grows. Le Ly says she is caught in the trap of having feelings for Anh but hating that she's in the midst of the sanctity of his marriage to Lien. She pays more attention to Lien, apparently hoping to soothe her own conscience. They begin an affair and she holds to him, believing that after having been raped, this is the nearest she'll come to having a husband of her own. The story reverts back to 1986. Le Ly is in the hands of a man driving a bicycle in Saigon in search of Anh's house.

Le Ly talks about the terrible toll the war is taking on the people of her village. She says that there is a great deal of anger and that many want revenge - a feeling that will remain prevalent for many years and that will hamper the rebuilding and survival of many families. She later says that the war remains in the minds of every family that prays for the soul of a son, daughter or parent killed in the fighting or as a bystander. While the people have been told that they are fighting to preserve the way of life their ancestors had built, Le Ly says that they come to realize that the war seems to be counterproductive on this point. An interesting point is that many of the children feel the Viet Cong are rewarding them for their allegiance and are anxious to earn these rewards, though they are nothing more than a cheap, homemade "medal" and their names on "the Blackboard of Honor." The desire to please the Viet Cong is so strong that the children tell on anyone acting suspiciously, even relatives and even with the realization that the person they tell on could be killed.

There are several cases in which the various characters say they have given up on life. Le Ly says this after she is raped. Her mother is placed under house arrest and walks to the very edge of her boundary, apparently hoping that she'll be killed for it. At one point, Le Ly's mother says the best Le Ly could hope for in her life is to be killed so that she



goes to the land of her ancestors and escapes this present hellish life. However, through all this, they and most others cling to life as something precious, which is human nature.



# Chapters Five and Six

## Chapters Five and Six Summary and Analysis

Le Ly's driver finds a young boy and asks for Anh's address to which the boy replies that he lives there. It turns out the child is Anh's son by his new wife. The story reverts to 1966 when Anh and Le Ly are having an affair. Anh has begun to distance himself somewhat from Le Ly and it is soon evident to everyone in the household that she's pregnant. Her mother sends her to an apothecary for a potion to cause a miscarriage but it fails and Le Ly later finds out that the apothecary had given her a useless draught, refusing to be part of the plan to force a miscarriage. Le Ly tries jumping down the stairs in an effort to miscarry but this also fails. One day Lien confronts Le Ly, telling her that she knows that the child is Anh's though Le Ly insists that a young boy unknown to Lien is actually the father. Le Ly's mother asks that Lien consider Le Ly as a second wife for Anh, but she refuses. Le Ly's mother points out that no one knows about this but Lien says they must both leave immediately. Anh gives in to that demand but refuses to have them put out on the street and instead sends them back to Danang where he promises to pay their living expenses. After Lien has left the room, Le Ly's mother tells Anh that Le Ly will eventually return to Saigon and reminds him to consider her as a second wife.

The story reverts back to 1986. Le Ly and Anh reunite at the home he shares with his new wife, Yen, he and Lien having divorced years prior. The new wife considers Le Ly as Anh's second wife though she was never formally acknowledged as such. Anh has children with this wife but his life is much less affluent, having lost his business to the government and now working a job in that company. Le Ly and Anh travel back to her hotel where she shows him pictures of their son. He has given her an overview of life in Vietnam after her departure.

The story reverts back to Le Ly's childhood and her relationship with her brother, Sau Ban. The siblings were close in age and spent a great deal of time together. Le Ly says he would have probably become an artist if he'd been born in some other place and time. Sau Ban is eventually confronted by the Republican army and told to report for duty - a request that meant he would be either in the military or prison. The fear is that he'll be fighting against family and friends who are members of the Viet Cong and he tries unsuccessfully to escape to join the Viet Cong. The parents hatch a plan to get him married and the wedding takes place a short time before he's sent to fight. Word eventually comes back that Sau Ban has been killed in combat and the young bride, obviously not pregnant, returns to her family.

The story reverts to the modern day and Le Ly reports for her appointment with the government officials. The story then drops to the days of her childhood and she recalls the efforts of government leaders to mimic the ways of Americans, including religion which prompts a new discrimination against Buddhists who refuse to become Christians. Le Ly's sister Ba, whose husband was taken away to a prison camp, is harassed by police, including a man named Chin who eventually pushes Ba into



marrying him though she has no real information that her husband is dead. Le Ly's father, Trong, opposes the relationship initially but later tells Le Ly that she shouldn't hate the facts but only the situation - the war - that caused it.

In Chapter Six, Le Ly and several others are in the briefing room of the Vietnamese National Committee in Saigon in 1986. They are told that they must register their itinerary, including whom they plan to visit and what stops they plan to make, with the VNC and that they must not deviate from this plan unless they notify the VNC. Anh and Le Ly then travel, as planned, to Danang where she hopes to reunite with her family. The story reverts to the flight Le Ly and her mother made to Danang after they are kicked out of Anh's home. Le Ly's father desperately misses his family and is at one point hospitalized at Giai Phau where military wounded are taken. Le Ly and her mother arrive and go to her sister Lan's apartment. Lan agrees to have Le Ly work as a housekeeper for room and board though Le Ly is often called on to serve Lan's guests at parties. Lan is putting back a great deal of money and is eventually pushed into paying Le Ly's medical bills as well after Anh's promised monetary aid is not forthcoming.

Le Ly hates her sister's lifestyle and Lan hates Le Ly's presence, eventually kicking Le Ly out to fend for herself for several days. The relationship between them gradually improves and is boosted when Le Ly interrupts a fight between Lan and a soldier. The soldier later apologizes and brings gifts and Le Ly says that he leaves Lan with another gift - a son that will be born the following year. Her mother is staying with their Uncle Nhu. Le Ly and her mother are visiting a cousin when Le Ly's water breaks and she delivers a son who she names Hung, who will become known as Jimmy in America. When her sister Hai arrives, she tells Le Ly to "chop the baby up in pieces" and discard it, an act that Le Ly knows means she should give her son up for adoption. But Le Ly and her mother love the child and willingly face the hardships of raising the boy.

When Le Ly is able to return to work, she sometimes goes with a relative who has soldiers buy items at their commissary and then sells them on the black market. Le Ly takes the business to another level and begins buying items and then taking them into the jungle where soldiers are unable to get away to purchase necessities, gum, cigarettes and liquor for themselves. She is making a good living at this and is told about marijuana. Her first endeavor selling the drug ends with her arrest though she's released because the marijuana is fake, a fact she's warned will get her killed by some soldiers. It's during this time that she learns that the Americans are just people, that they are homesick and hate the war, and that they aren't that much different from Le Ly herself.

The story reverts to present day and Le Ly, now on approach to the Danang airport, wonders about the reception she'll have from her family.

Lien is frail and Le Ly has convinced herself that Lien will "accept her predicament" based largely on Anh's affection for Le Ly and Le Ly's kindness to Lien. Lien adamantly refuses to be the second in Anh's life as she must know she will be if Le Ly is accepted into the household as Anh's second wife, as Le Ly's mother requests. The relationships



probably seem strange to most readers but it's important to remember the cultural background. Le Ly's mother points out to Lien that having Le Ly as Anh's second wife means Le Ly will basically be Lien's servant. Her mother probably thinks this is a good selling point but Lien already has paid servants and doesn't care about this. What she does care about is her husband's fidelity, unusual in this culture where men sometimes take second and third wives, if they are able to afford this luxury. In a place where the needs and wants of men is the most important aspect of life, Le Ly believes that Anh's wants will trump those of his wife and is devastated when he gives in to her demands to send Le Ly away. Another interesting aspect of the relationships here is that Le Ly's mother derides Le Ly and literally spits hatred at her for causing trouble. However, at another time Le Ly's marriage is discussed and her mother says that Le Ly, having been the petted baby of the family, will have no idea how to serve her husband's mother. Despite this, Le Ly's mother doesn't seem to take any responsibility for having allowed Le Ly to remain the petted baby of the family. It seems that showing emotion or affection is taboo and that Le Ly's mother actually loves her youngest daughter greatly.

When Le Ly and Lan argue and Lan kicks her young, pregnant sister out onto the streets, their father intercedes. He is angry with both and tells Lan that families must stick together, especially in times of hardship such as this. He shames Lan who seems to suddenly remember her familial responsibility and love. What's just as interesting is that he leaves word for Le Ly that she has shamed him by being an unwed mother, though Le Ly's own mother is spreading the story that Le Ly's military husband is involved in fighting.

Le Ly, upon her arrival in Danang and prior to reuniting with her family, seems to second-guess her visit and her choices. She's aware of the envy of many of the people who see her in her American clothing with all its trappings and she wonders whether her own family will also envy her these things or if they'll pity her for the price she's paid for them - namely giving up her home and family for the past decades.



# Chapters Seven and Eight

## Chapters Seven and Eight Summary and Analysis

Le Ly recalls her business endeavor, selling the sundries to the soldiers and on the black market, which lasted about two years. One day she could stand the separation from her father no longer and slips through the jungle to her home where she finds him, emaciated and near death. She tries to ask the American soldiers for her father but the translator refuses to help her ask. Le Ly helps her father recover and he later comes to visit her and to see young Hung. On what would be his final visit, he tells Le Ly that a psychic had indicated that he had no future to read and says that he is "fed up" with the situation. Chin arrives later and with the news that their father had drunk acid and killed himself.

The story reverts to the present day at the Pacific Hotel in Danang. Le Ly's niece, Tinh, arrives and says that her sons have gone to get Le Ly's mother and sister. Le Ly has sent gifts to her family over the years though she has seldom sent money because cash is often confiscated and causes the family problems with officials. Vitamins, clothing and other items have mostly been sold by the family on the black market in order to buy essentials. As Le Ly learns that she is not to see Ba during her visit she realizes that dire circumstances have caused her family much grief and that they are grasping and vindictive as a result. Le Ly isn't overly critical, admitting that she might have been equally so if she hadn't escaped to America.

Le Ly is welcomed into the home of Tinh and Bien and waits for their son to return with Le Ly's mother and sister. They have noodles for lunch, a type normally too expensive for everyday but Le Ly eats several bowls, knowing that the gifts she's brought will make up for the expense to the family. Tinh and Le Ly go to the market to shop for supper and Le Ly puts on traditional clothing and walks with a shuffling gait typical of the overworked women of the area. The story then reverts to Le Ly's childhood.

Le Ly is left with the task of finding her father's body at the Nha Xac morgue. She eventually does so and it takes a great deal of time and effort to arrange a traditional Buddhist ceremony for him, including permission from several officials. This is finally accomplished, followed by a formal period of mourning and other rituals guaranteed to help his spirit on its way. Le Ly says that Christians believe in eternal life as a way of attaining eternal peace, but says that her father's death has given her that gift.

In Chapter Eight, the story returns to 1986 at a market near China Beach, Danang. Tinh's son returns and tells Le Ly that her mother hasn't come with him but that her sister Hai has. Le Ly goes to her and Hai is immediately angry, telling her to go away so that her family can live. Le Ly suddenly realizes that she is in Vietnam where rights mean little and life is nothing to the government officials. She hurries back to Tinh's house where Bien closes the windows and doors against prying eyes, reinforcing Le Ly's fears. When Hai arrives there, having finished her own work at the marketplace, her



greeting to Le Ly is sisterly, loving and strong, again making Le Ly realize that her visit has put her family in danger. The story then reverts to Le Ly's childhood, soon after the death of her father. She says she spends more time close to home in order to be with Hung more.

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Le Ly says that Vietnam is like a baby that had been fought over by parents who had pulled on the child so viciously that they'd torn the babe in two, completely destroying it in the process. Le Ly has become so overcome with grief over losses imposed by the war that she wants a place to escape. This, combined with her emerging knowledge of American soldiers and ethics prompts her to wonder if America could be the place of security that she longs for. However, she does know that American mothers and wives are losing their sons and husbands in Vietnam, just as the people of Vietnam are losing their loved ones. She doesn't continue her thoughts on this topic until much later but it's obvious that the idea of going to America emerges early in her life.

Le Ly says that she has no problem with those who chose to live their lives as prostitutes but hated the situations that forced women and children into prostitution, especially the officials who used their positions to coerce young women and the men who pimped out their female relatives or girlfriends.

Le Ly remains fearful that her family won't accept her upon her return and there's a point where she doesn't believe she'll meet again with either her brother, one of her sisters or her mother. When she meets her older brother, she's dismayed to realize that he doesn't trust her and that he believes she might poison him. He makes a point of saying that he never accepted any of her gifts but that their siblings and mother were in need of her help. It's evident to Le Ly, though heartbreaking, that she can never again reconnect with her family as equals.



# Chapters Nine through Eleven

## Chapters Nine through Eleven Summary and Analysis

Le Ly relates the story of a woman who watched as her son was shot down because he ran from the American soldiers - a sure precursor of death. She is then shot as well and is paralyzed so that a young grandchild has to care for her until he is also killed. Le Ly says that it's these stories that make her realize that the only chance for her survival and that of her son is to escape Vietnam. The story reverts to 1986. Le Ly arrives at the home of Tinh to find her mother there. The older woman is initially very cool but later warms to Le Ly and they are there when Bon Nghe, her oldest brother, arrives, saying that he'd managed to take off work in order to see his sister and mother reunited though he still refuses Le Ly's offer of candy, even at his mother's insistence.

When the conversation turns to Le Ly's life, she's unsure what she can say that won't sound like bragging. She says she wants to give her mother the American luxuries of new clothes, a professional haircut and lotions to smooth her skin, but admits that not knowing about these things are what keeps her mother from desiring them. When Le Ly and her mother are parting, Le Ly cries for her lost family, their hardships and their torn lives. Her mother says Le Ly is young enough to have tears but that she has cried all her tears away and has no more to give.

In Chapter Nine, the story reverts to Le Ly's youth. She says that she began spending less time on her business and more time with her family and that all her actions were geared toward getting ready to leave her homeland, though she doesn't realize the significance for awhile. When she does, she puts her mind to finding a way out. One day an MP she knows as Big Mike tells her he has two young marines who have been in the jungle for a year and want to have sex before they go home, just hours from now. Le Ly refuses but when she's offered four hundred dollars for the two men and knowing she could take care of herself, her son, her mother and the expanded household of her sister Lan with her new son, Eddie, for two years or more. It's through her sister Lan that Le Ly meets a young American soldier named Steve who offers her a job at a hospital.

The story reverts to present day and Le Ly returns to the hotel to find Anh there with two officials who question her about America, Americans and Vietnamese people living in America. Le LY says that one complaint is that the American soldiers missing in action have not been returned and the officials say if they could produce some documentation for these men, they would. After the visit, Le Ly is confused and Anh says that there are those who want better relationships between the two countries but that the system keeps working against them.

In Chapter Eleven, the story reverts back to Le Ly's youth. She is soon singled out by an overweight administrator for his sexual advances but another soldier, a man named Greg but called Red, sees the situation and transfers Le Ly to the radiology lab. Le Ly and Red are soon dating and she does her best to please him though he demands that



she change her appearance for him. When he tries to make her dance in a topless bar, she leaves him. The story reverts to the present and Anh accompanies Le Ly on a tourist's visit of the country. They pass near Ky La and Le Ly wants to run to the village of her childhood but Anh reminds her it would put her mother and Hai in great danger and she doesn't.

Le Ly's mother says that Lan had given her lots of gold and jewelry and that she'd not spent any of it, giving some away and burying some but later forgetting where she'd buried it. Le Ly says she's not certain how much of the story is true and how much is a figment of her mother's imagination. Le Ly's mother is then bitter about the fact that Ba apparently kept the gifts for herself that Le Ly had sent for the family. It seems that if the gold had really existed, Le Ly's mother should have used it when times were so difficult for the family. Le Ly's mother and the rest of the family have shunned Ba because of this selfishness. Le Ly's mother has trouble dealing with the loss of loved ones, a point Le Ly puts down to a lack of connection with the spiritual world. She relates the story of a blacksnake she found in her house that she is certain embodied the soul of Le Ly's brother who died. The idea seems to bring comfort to her mother and Le Ly says this is more important than knowing that the story is true.





# Chapters Twelve through Fourteen

## Chapters Twelve through Fourteen Summary and Analysis

Le Ly, having left her job at the hospital and refusing a job as a topless dancer, soon finds a job in a large trailer that touts gambling tables. On her way to work one night she meets a civil service employee named Jim who tells her that he'll take care of her and her family if she will live with him and care for him as his wife. She agrees after some initial hesitation and finds him loving to her and her son who they are soon calling Jimmy. He pays for a housekeeper for her mother so that she has nothing to do but care for the child and they often take Jimmy to the apartment they share for a night or a weekend. Then Jim's drinking increases and he is violent, accusing Le Ly of being unfaithful. When he almost chokes her to death, she tells an MP and Jim is arrested. Le Ly later tries to find a job with the Americans and is amazed when a man who attacks her is arrested when such actions are usually swept away with no reprisal.

The story reverts to modern day and Le Ly meets formally with her brother Bon, meeting his wife and son and learning that some of the gifts she'd sent her mother had been given to Bon's only son. Le Ly receives permission for her mother to spend a night in her hotel where she shows the many gifts she's brought and the two women talk into the night. In chapter thirteen, Le Ly wakes to find her mother has slept on the floor instead of the bed. The story reverts to her youth and she spends a great deal of money to obtain a birth certificate so that she can work at an American GI club. She begins seeing a soldier named Paul Rogers but he leaves without saying good-bye. She is then introduced to an older man named Ed by a friend of Lan's. Though she tries to dodge his advances, he proposes the second time they meet, promising to take her back to California with him when he leaves.

The story reverts to 1985 and Ba arrives at her mother's invitation for their final meal together before Le Ly's departure. In chapter fourteen, the family spends an evening together though there are some harsh words between Bon and Ba, Bon criticizing Ba for having accepted the advances of Chin and pointing out that her life would have been better with her first husband who was a member of the "winning side" of the war. The story reverts to Le Ly's youth. She pays a great deal of money to obtain official permission to leave the country with her son and gives birth to a second, Thomas, prior to her departure. She notes that the final words she hears before leaving Vietnam is an official saying that all Vietnamese money should be deposited in a basket before boarding the plane. The story reverts to 1986 and Le Ly, after a tearful farewell to her family, leaves the country again.

Le Ly's emotions are raw as she prepares to leave, realizing that she'll probably never see her mother alive again. At one point, she asks her brother what he thinks now of their father's death and says that he committed suicide to keep from handing Le Ly over to the Viet Cong, a story that wasn't made completely clear at the time of his death



though Le Ly does say that her father had a message for her from the Viet Cong and that the message wasn't important. Though Le Ly seems to want to talk to her brother about that, he refuses and it's again clear that he is a loyal member of the Communist Party now in control of the country and is unwilling to do or say anything that might jeopardize that position.

Le Ly tells her brother and his son that she hopes to set up a clinic in Vietnam for the people there who need medical attention. Her brother agrees to help her if she gets that situation underway but doesn't seem optimistic that she can do so.

The relationships between the various family members remain clouded in tradition and formality but it seems that Ba greatly regrets her actions that have estranged her from her family. Ba had retained gifts sent by Le Ly and meant for the family and on the eve of Le Ly's departure, Ba tries to explain her actions by citing the hardships she'd endured. Le Ly is saddened by the grasping actions of her family but realizes that she wasn't around to endure those times and might have been just as desperate.

Almost as interesting as what's said is what Le Ly omits. She says nothing of the way her sister, Lan, escaped the country. It's important that the reader realize that Le Ly, at the time of her marriage to Ed, is so young that her mother has to sign a paper allowing her to leave the country. Le Ly tricks her mother into signing, saying that she's setting up a bank account. Her mother says that she's glad Le Ly escaped, saying that her life and those of her Amerasian children would have been difficult in Vietnam. The epilogue reveals that Ed died in 1973 and that she seeks help for her cause, that of creating a clinic for the people of Vietnam.



# Characters

## Le Ly Hayslip

Called Bay Ly by her family which means "sixth," she is the author of the book. She is born in Vietnam and flees to the United States to escape persecution by her government during the 1970s. As a child, she is caught up in the ideals of the war between the Viet Cong and the Republicans, complicated by the presence of the Americans, though she doesn't fully understand either the politics or the reasoning behind the arguments posed by either side. Le Ly finds herself in the unenviable position of being a heroine of her people because of her reaction to a sudden appearance of an American military helicopter. Le Ly is frozen in fear of being sucked up by the whirling blades and is touted as a heroine because she stands firm and doesn't run. She allows the village to tout her bravery and courage though she doesn't believe it herself.

Le Ly's relationship with her mother is unusual in one way because her mother refused to give up on Le Ly as an infant, going to extremes to save her life. However, her mother later becomes more of the traditional Vietnamese mother, citing Le Ly's worthlessness aloud though she pays an expensive bribe to get Le Ly out of prison. Her relationship with her father is very unusual because he treats her more as he would treat a son, spoiling her and sharing information with her that would normally be shared only with a son. Le Ly's will to survive is strong though she says that she wanted to die after being raped by soldiers. She returns to Vietnam with the stated objective of finding out what happened to her family and making sense of her life in Vietnam. It seems that she may have, to some degree, survivor's remorse - a feeling that she wasn't worthy to survive - and that could be at least part of her reason for returning to Vietnam.

## Phung Trong

Le Ly's father, he is somewhat unusual in his love and devotion to his family. Le Ly points out that her father is one of the only men she knows who is willing and able to do work generally designated as "women's work" without complaint. She relates a story of her father taking care of her while her mother was away and of his giving her a cookie as a bribe to be good, later putting a cookie under her pillow as a surprise. Trong spends time with Le Ly in ways that a father would ordinarily reserve for a son and he laments the fact that the war has torn his family apart. Trong is fearful of the war-torn country and takes the death of a neighbor as an opportunity to teach Le Ly that it can be dangerous to talk to other people about one's beliefs or ideals. Trong is disappointed with Le Ly when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock and vows that he won't see her again, but insists that her sister be nice to Le Ly while Le Ly is pregnant, thus showing his concern for his young daughter even while unable to bend enough to take her back to his heart.



The separation of father and family is interesting in that Trong desperately wants to be with his children but greatly fears leaving the land that was home to his ancestors. This traditional attachment is typical of his life and personality. When Trong is confronted by the Viet Cong with regard to Le Ly, he comes to visit her with the news that he has a message from the Viet Cong but doesn't relate the exact nature of that message. He kills himself a short time later and Le Ly says that he commits the act to save her from the Viet Cong.

## **Ed Munro**

An overweight civil engineer working with the American military in Vietnam, Ed sees Le Ly and gives a woman money to introduce him to her. He is persistent in his requests to see her though she tells him that she hasn't any desire to have a boyfriend, having had bad luck with previous relationships. Ed is kind and wants nothing more than a wife willing to be a wife to him in his older years. Though he has children of his own, he is delighted with the birth of a son prior to their leaving Vietnam. Le Ly does not reveal his fate after leaving Vietnam.

## **Anh**

A young married man who is Le Ly's employer in Saigon, Anh is handsome and very wealthy when he and Le Ly meet. Anh would probably have taken Le Ly as his second wife but bows to the demands of his first wife and has Le Ly and her mother go away to Danang for Le Ly to give birth to their son. Anh and Le Ly never reconnect though he and his wife later divorce and he remarries. He does, however, come to refer to Le Ly as his second wife, a fact that holds weight with his new wife and with Le Ly's mother.

## **Ba**

Le Ly's older sister, Ba is married to a man who is arrested by the Viet Cong and taken away to prison. She is later confronted by a young Viet Cong named Chin and eventually gives in to Chin's demands to become his wife though she doesn't know whether her first husband is dead. Le Ly later says that she wonders if Ba's decision would have been different had her family stood more solidly behind her during those troubling times.

## **Lan**

Lan is Le Ly's sister and quickly accepts the presence of Americans in her life, taking a series of American boyfriends and urging Le Ly to do the same. Lan eventually escapes to America like Le Ly though the details of this escape is not related by Le Ly's story.



## Hai

Le Ly's sister, Hai is serious about life and is living with Le Ly's mother when Le Ly returns to Vietnam. Hai is married with a young daughter when her husband is arrested for "suspiciously" carrying rice stalks along a roadway. Hai moves later to Saigon where she works as a cook and helps Le Ly locate a job.

## Bon Nghe

Le Ly's older brother, Bon Nghe joins the Republican Army while Le Ly is very young and his leaving seems to make a tremendous impact on her life. He remains a part of the military and government and staunchly refuses all efforts made by Le Ly to provide American gifts for him or his family. Bon Nghe is an interesting character in that he obviously loves his sister though he doesn't fully trust her and doesn't approve of her life choices.

## Sau Ban

Le Ly's brother, Sau is near in age to Le Ly and the two are often in each other's company as children. Sau is eventually called into service by the Republicans but wants to join the Viet Cong, though his first attempt to escape to join the Viet Cong is foiled. Sau is reported killed in combat though his body is never returned home to his family and Le Ly continues to hope that news will come that he wasn't killed. Her mother recounts the story of a black snake that arrives at their home. The snake is the same length as Sau's height and is sickly and follows Le Ly's mother to their traditional burial grounds where her mother and sister bury the snake. Le Ly's mother is convinced this is Sau's way of returning his soul to be buried next to their father.

## Hung

Later known as Jimmy, he is Le Ly's son by the wealthy married employer, Jimmy is cared for mainly by Le Ly's mother while Le Ly devotes herself to making a living in order to keep her family off the streets. He becomes known as Jimmy during Le Ly's relationship with a young American GI named Jim.



## Objects/Places

### **Ky La**

Later called Xa Hoa Qui, this is the village where Le Ly spent the first twelve years of her life. The village is between the North and South provinces meaning the loyalties are always divided and the village always fought over.

### **Don Pho Xanh**

The prison where Hai's husband is taken after his arrest.

### **Danang**

Where Le Ly's sister Ba lives and where Le Ly and goes for a brief stay and where Le Ly is sent to have her son.

### **Saigon**

Where Le Ly's sister Hai lives and where Le Ly and her mother live when Le Ly becomes pregnant.

### **Don Thi Tran Prison**

Where Le Ly is taken after warning the Viet Cong of the presence of Republican and American soldiers.

### **My Thi**

A torture camp where Le Ly is held briefly.

### **Tan Son Nhut Airport**

Where Le Ly arrives in Vietnam.

### **Giai Phau**

Where Le Ly's father is hospitalized after his family is driven out of their village.



## **The Pacific Hotel**

The hotel in Danang where Le Ly stays on her return trip to the country.

## **Nha Xac**

The morgue where Le Ly's father's body is taken.



# Themes

## The Will to Survive

The author gives many details about the lives of the people of her village during the years of her childhood and many are faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles and hardships. Despite these, most of the people fight to survive and continue to do so even when their lives are incredibly difficult. Le Ly tells the story of many of these with most choosing to continue fighting for the right to live long after it seems human endurance would have been exhausted. At one point, a woman drinks her own urine to survive until help arrives.

Le Ly and her mother are also examples of this will to survive. Two young men who are soldiers with the Viet Cong rape Le Ly and when she has been violated for the second time, Le Ly says that her life is over and that she is not fit for marriage to anyone. She says that she might as well die after this encounter but she continues to live. In fact, she continues to hope for marriage and love. Later, Le Ly's mother is harassed by soldiers and is minutes from death when a family member intervenes. Le Ly's mother is allowed to live but is threatened with death if she disobeys house arrest. While she presses the boundaries of her arrest, she doesn't directly violate it and continues to choose life though it would have been easy to die.

## Coming of Age

Le Ly ages over the course of the book, not only in age but emotionally as well. Le Ly is a child as the story opens and she talks about the life of a child in a village coveted by two warring sides of a civil war. There, she is anxious to please the side initially chosen by members of her village - the Viet Cong. She says that the rewards are small and come in the form of a bottle cap made to be a medal and her name written on a blackboard reserved for those deserving of this "honor." The cost, however, is high and the children who seek favor in this way do so by giving bits of information used to implicate friends, neighbors and family members. These people are sometimes put to death on the word of children. Le Ly and the other children also play at war and Le Ly says that she plays at these war games initially though her heart is never fully into the game, but eventually comes to understand that the war is actually tearing her country apart so that the home of her ancestors no longer exists. Le Ly also comes to realize that the soldiers she fears are merely people - young boys like her own brothers who want only to return home. This eventually teaches her that she can leave the home of her childhood and her ancestors to make a life of her own, a realization that she could only have achieved as a mature young woman.





## The Importance of Tradition

Le Ly's life and family are steeped in tradition and these are vital to their peace, especially in the times of war. One aspect of this is seen in the ways the people deal with the dead. Le Ly goes to great lengths to arrange and oversee the traditional burial and the days of mourning afterwards. The details of these traditions include the fact that her father is taken to his burial ground, feet first. Le Ly says that she is able to connect with her father on a spiritual level after the death of her father, a feat her mother hasn't mastered. Le Ly is never able to accept the death of her brother and this may be because she didn't have the comfort of a traditional burial. Her mother, however, comes to accept the death of Le Ly's brother, Sau Ban, after finding a large black snake in her house and coming to believe that it's the embodiment of the spirit of Sau. When Le Ly's mother beckons to this snake, it follows her from the house to the burial grounds of their ancestors and then crawls into a hollow bamboo where it waits to be buried. Le Ly doesn't seem convinced that this is her brother's spirit but her mother's belief provides her with great comfort that makes the death of her son easier to withstand.

# Style

## Perspective

The story is written in first person from the perspective of the author, Le Ly Hayslip. An interesting journalistic tool is seen in the author's changing from past tense to present tense. The story is written in two very specific time frames - the author's childhood and youth and her return to Vietnam as an adult. The earlier time is written in past tense but the latter is written in present tense. This tense change makes the reader more aware of the changes in time and brings attention to the fact that the earlier time is written by the author from her memories. The perspective is entirely limited in that the author tells of her own experiences, thoughts and memories without revealing anything of the thoughts of others. For example, the author talks of the experience of her sister after the imprisonment of her husband. Le Ly much later says that her sister's life might have been much different if her family had stood behind her in that difficult time rather than leaving her to make her own way in the world. However, Le Ly does not discuss this with her sister directly.

## Tone

The overall tone of the story is one of hopelessness and fear though there is an undertone of hope and a belief in a better life. The story includes many references to the life and culture of the people of Vietnam of the periods covered by the author, both during and after the war. Among these discussions are the author's discoveries about the foreign soldiers who are just people. This realization is both reassuring and frightening to her because it means that the invaders arrive in her country and commit atrocities that make Le Ly more fearful and insecure. She also comes to realize that these are men - sometimes little more than boys - who just want to go home safely. She comes to find that she likes some of the American soldiers and eventually becomes involved with several, both as friends and in sexual relationships. There are some references to legends and traditions that make the reader more vividly aware of Le Ly's life as a youngster. For example, she gives detailed information about the burial rites upon her father's death, focusing on the fact that she believes her father's spirit remains nearby and provides her with a peace that she lacked prior to his death. Another legend presented to the reader is that of the god who sent grass and rice to the farmer in ancient days. The messenger got the two bags mixed up so that the farmer had to work hard to raise the rice while the grass grew prolifically - the opposite of what the god had instructed.

## Structure

The story is divided into fourteen chapters. The chapters are titled Coming Back, Fathers and Daughters, Open Wounds, Losing the Way, Losing Love, A Question of



Faith, A Different View, Sisters and Brothers, Daughters and Sons, Power on Earth, Almost in Paradise, Finding a Family, Finding Peace and Letting Go. The chapters give clues as to the contents of the chapters but only vague clues. The book is divided between dialogue and narrative. Both are believable to the story though it should be noted that the dialogue is written not as direct quotes but from the author's memory. The reader should keep in mind that the author's memory could be tainted from the passage of time or from a reluctance to show herself in anything other than a positive light. For example, she is often accosted by men, both soldiers and civilians, but never does anything to lead them on and never gives in to their demands. It's left to the reader to determine the truth of the author's words. The story is not presented in chronological order. In fact, the story hops routinely from present to memories of her childhood. This isn't overly confusing but the memories from her childhood are also not presented in chronological order, which some readers may find confusing. For example, she mentions that the children of her village play at war but that she is torn by these games because her older brother is a member of the Republican military force while her older sister's husband is a member of the Viet Cong police force. Le Ly later tells the story of her sister's marriage to a Republican soldier who is taken away by the Viet Cong. It's only then that she becomes the object of affection for a Viet Cong police officer and eventually becomes his wife. This erratic presentation is somewhat disconcerting but most readers will be able to put the time line together accurately.

## Quotes

"This rice was kept in bins behind a bamboo curtain which was also a hiding place for valuables, weapons and supplies, and little kids like me when soldiers came into our village." Chapter 1, Page 9

"Providing saviors in the form of fatherly strangers who are willing to interrupt their lives in order to help others may be the way of fate, but it is also the way of governments who wish to ensure that certain people do certain things." Chapter 2, Page 61

"A treasure-trove of government supplies - backpacks, tools, spilled cartons of rations, and bits and pieces of wrecked equipment - lay everywhere on the road, along with several crumpled bodies." Chapter 3, Page 67

"Ominously, they seemed to talk about us the way we talked about our barnyard animals on the day they ceased to be pets and began to look like supper." Chapter 3, Page 78

"Compassion flows from what you do right now - future intentions don't count." Chapter 5, Page 142

"The older men (mostly civilians with balding heads and lots of money), sailors and soldiers in clean uniforms weren't so bad; what I feared most were the marines in fatigues who sometimes stopped by on their way back from the field - smelling like water buffalo, unshaven, with their weapons and the reflection of death in their eyes." Chapter 6, Page 174

"Both she and Ba had tried to discourage me from making the trip - saying there were rumors that my father had been beaten and that danger was everywhere - but they understood neither the risks I had already taken in my business nor the fact that I now knew Americans to be a bit less brutal and more trustworthy than either the Vietnamese or the Viet Cong forces." Chapter 7, Page 195

"Once I'm inside, Bien begins closing the doors and shuttering the windows, making me feel more than ever like contraband or a spy or a dirty old lady peddling the worst kind of American smut: freedom from want and worry." Chapter 8, Page 219

"You come into this life happy and the rest of the world tries to take that happiness away from you." Chapter 9, Page 254

"His question should not have been, 'Why did you come back?' but 'How could you stay away so long?'" Chapter 12, Page 307

"Hating people who had wronged me only kept me in their power. Forgiving them and thanking them for the lesson they had taught me, on the other hand, set me free to continue on my way." Chapter 12, Page 326



"We in the U.S. can give them the light they need - at least a little more than they have right now. Why do you think the Statue of Liberty holds up a torch and not a moneybag or a pistol?" Chapter 14, Page 342



## Topics for Discussion

Describe Le Ly's childhood. What is her life like as a child? What is her family like?

What is the significance of Le Ly's childhood village home to the two warring armies of Vietnam? What is the importance of this to the people of the village?

List the members of Le Ly's immediate family. What are their lives like during and after the war?

Describe Le Ly's relationship with various members of her family? How does the war impact various relationships?

How does Le Ly become pregnant with her first son? What is the result of that affair? How does she become pregnant with her second son? How do Le Ly's dreams for a future with a husband change over the course of her life?

How does Le Ly come to realize that her life would be better in the United States? What preparations does she make to make this happen? How does it eventually come to pass?

What does Le Ly's mother believe to be the traditional role of women? What examples does Le Ly give of this ideal? What actions do Le Ly take over the course of her life in her efforts to live up to the expectations of her mother and father?